
Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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This past week was the 100th anniversary of one of the most talked about matches in pro wrestling history, the July 4, 1916, match in Omaha pitting the two men who would go on to become the biggest stars of the 1920s, Ed "Strangler" Lewis and Joe Stecher, in a match that went nearly five hours.

Holiday wrestling spectacles were a part of wrestling for decades, particularly Thanksgiving and Christmas. At one time they were the two best days of the year for the business.

Aside from the 1980s, and at the turn of the century, wrestling largely avoided having major shows on the nation's birthday. When pro wrestling was truly mainstream in the community, such as in some places in the '80s, running July 4th for a big show made sense and did big business at times. Really the day is more about fireworks and it's neither a good day for a PPV because so much of the audience will have other plans, nor for an indoor arena event when people are looking to see fireworks outdoors.

The earliest known major match on July 4th was actually William Muldoon, pro wrestling's biggest star, facing Matsuda Sorakichi, a 21-year-old Japanese pro wrestler billed as a sumo star in what was called a mixed match in Springfield, OH in 1880.

Cleveland and Tom Jenkins, its hometown hero, had their own July 4th local wrestling tradition for a few years. Jenkins was considered America's top heavyweight wrestler at the turn of the century, before Frank Gotch's popularity made pro wrestling into something of a major sport.

Jenkins wrestled Ernest Roeber for what was billed as the Catch-as-catch-can world title at the League Park baseball stadium on July 4, 1899 (although Dan McLeod was listed as champion at the time). Jenkins beat McLeod in Cleveland on November 7, 1901, and did another stadium show for the American heavyweight title or catch-as-catch can title against him at the same stadium in on July 4, 1902. He also had other July 4th matches in Cleveland.

Jenkins was a key figure in wrestling history because he lost to both Gotch and George Hackenschmidt in big matches which set up the Gotch vs. Hackenschmidt bouts in 1908 and 1911 which made pro wrestling mainstream like it had never been before. With the exception of horse racing and some major college football games, the Gotch-Hackenschmidt II crowd of nearly 29,000 fans in Chicago was among the largest sports crowds up to that point ever in the United States.

Gotch, who replaced Jenkins as the top heavyweight wrestler in the U.S. after a series of matches between 1904 and 1906, was regarded by some as the first legitimate world champion, had one July 4th title defense, against Joe Smejkal at the Chicago Coliseum in 1912.

Stecher, a top amateur star, known as "The Scissors King" for his use of the body scissors, similar to the body triangle in MMA, was the heir apparent to Gotch as the best young wrestler in the country. Gotch had health issues and died young and perhaps for that reason, no Gotch vs. Stecher match ever took place. The belief is that had Stecher beaten Gotch as opposed to Gotch retiring without losing the title, that Stecher would have been viewed at Gotch's level and made him more of an instant star, a bigger draw and one of the great historical legends.

Stecher never had the notoriety of Gotch, nor did he have the enduring legend of the country's next major national star, Lewis.

Stecher's defense against Lewis drew 18,000 fans from throughout the Midwest. Keep in mind the population of Omaha at the time was about

125,000, and cars were still relatively new. For that era and for a city of that size, it was an amazingly large sports crowd.

The match was announced as to the finish, starting at 4 p.m. on July 4th, and held outdoors to meet the demand as there were no indoor buildings large enough to hold it.

Exactly what happened depends on who is telling the story. From all accounts written live and at the time, the match was horrible, an endless stall blamed on neither man wanting to make an offensive move for fear of being countered. Keep in mind that almost all pro wrestling by this point was worked, so matches like this didn't happen. But because both participants ended up becoming so much bigger stars, the illusion of the match became legendary. From an historical standpoint, with the exception of the two Gotch-Hackenschmidt matches, it was probably the most famous of that era.

There are those who claim this match was a key in pro wrestling becoming worked, but that's clearly not true. Based on things written at the time, about 95 percent or more of pro wrestling was worked by the turn of the century. Almost all accounts have this as a shooting match for the world title, a rarity. There were very few of those after this one, and perhaps how this match went was part of the reason why.

At 8 p.m., when it was starting to get dark, promoter Gene Melady proposed ending the match and starting over the next morning, when they'd have even more time to get to a finish. According to Steve Yohe's biography of Lewis, Stecher agreed but Sandow and Lewis wanted the match to continue that night and stating the contract said they were going to a finish. In those days, stadiums didn't have lights. They ended up bringing in cars near the field and turned on their headlights so fans could see what was happening. One version said Lewis did nothing but back away and stall, and fans were throwing seat cushions into the ring. At the 291:33 (four hours, 51 ½ minute) mark of the match, police jumped into the ring for fear the crowd, throwing more seat cushions into the ring, would get even more out of control. They polled the committee of sportswriters at ringside, since there were no judges since it was supposed to be to a finish, and they ruled that the match was a draw, which tells you that neither man must have had any kind of a significant advantage, particularly since Stecher was the hometown guy.

Both men were promised \$5,022, a real number given that lawsuits were threatened and filed over it over local authorities wanting to hold up the purses due to the lack of action. At the time, a middle-class American would earn about \$680 per year, so that would be like a \$385,000 WrestleMania payoff today and this was just off the live gate, and this was before both were earning far more than that for their big matches in the '20s. While both were blamed for the match, because Stecher was from nearby Dodge, Nebraska, and was the crowd favorite, he was eventually forgiven. Lewis was generally viewed as a heel in Nebraska for years to come.

Worse for the locals, was they lost a ton of money gambling on the match. In Omaha and in the area, nobody expected Stecher to lose so the odds on him winning weren't big enough to entice the locals to gamble. Stecher had been winning almost all of his matches quickly, and most in two straight falls. The key bets were on Stecher winning in less than 60 minutes or for even better odds, less than 30 minutes.

This leads to the natural speculation that Lewis' side took the heavy bets and he was willing to stall the first hour to make sure his side won, but that only explains the first hour.

After the match was over, Billy Sandow, the promoter of Lewis, went around the country talking about the brutal five hour match and that Stecher was almost finished when the match was stopped. He claimed Stecher had to be hospitalized with a pulse of 134 while Lewis went

out dancing that night. In time that version of the story, told by Lewis as well, became the standard version. In time, the match length in time also ended up being talked about as six hours, with the idea that it was still going at 2 a.m. when it was finally called. It was also considered among the last shoot matches for the world title.

Stecher tried to pacify Omaha after saying he wouldn't face Lewis again unless it was in Omaha. Lewis and Stecher had many matches after that point, but it is believed none of them were legitimate. Stecher tried to keep his word, as after Lewis set a record for the largest crowd on the West Coast the next January in San Francisco, Stecher's manager told promoter Frank Schuler that he would refuse to face Lewis unless it was in Omaha.

The two next met on April 26, 1918, in a main event in a sold out Madison Square Garden. The match sold out partially off what had already become the legend of the Omaha match. This went to a two hour draw. This was clearly a worked match that the local newspapers reported as the best match of the season, noting both men got each other in punishing deadly holds but that were miraculously broken.

In wrestling publications in the 1950s, the July 4, 1916 match was written about as one of the most important matches in history, both because of its length and because of how big historically both participants were, as they went on to be the dominant stars of the 1920s, with Lewis being a top tier mainstream sports figure. Because Gotch passed away young, when wrestling had its revival on television in the late '40s and into the '50s, Lewis was its elder statesman and media living legend. While all but a few of his matches were worked, by this point the media and public believed he was the champion when wrestling was real. His reputation grew with stories about how much money he had earned (and lost between gambling and divorces and high-living) and his shooting prowess. Like other wrestling myths, for years Lewis was known for having had more than 6,200 matches and losing only 33 times, numbers which were as fictitious as any wrestling legends of any era. Lewis was later used as the manager of Lou Thesz in the '50s and when he'd come to town to promote Thesz, he could get newspaper and television media like nobody else.

When promoting Thesz, often the subject would go back to Lewis' most famous matches, and in time, the "six hour match" with his story about going out dancing after was often repeated. Almost all versions said by that time where his claims of how he was wearing Stecher down and claiming the moral win by virtue of being fine when it was over while Stecher was exhausted in the epic encounter, a titanic struggle the likes of which was never seen again in wrestling history.

While Stecher remained world champion, a second version of the title cropped up when Lewis beat former Olympian John Olin in Chicago with Frank Gotch as referee. Lewis lost the title to Wladek Zbyszko on June 6, 1917, in San Francisco, leading to a rematch on July 4, 1917, at Braves Stadium in Boston, where Lewis regained the title in front of 15,000 fans.

After that, big shows on July 4th were avoided for the most part. During that era, with baseball as the major sport, wrestling didn't run as many big events during the summer. Even when they did, that date was always avoided, even during the '20s, and even after the success July 4th shows had previously.

In fact, we can't find a record of a truly major July 4th show in the United States again until 1964, when Verne Gagne beat Dick the Bruiser to retain the AWA title at Met Stadium in Minneapolis before 11,000 fans, which in those days would have been considered a good showing. Nevertheless, the AWA, which had a Thanksgiving and later Christmas holiday tradition, usually avoided that date for major events the rest of its history.

Jim Crockett Promotions ran the Greensboro Coliseum on July 4, 1974, which ended up being somewhat historical because second from the top, Ric Flair & Rip Hawk beat Paul Jones & Bob Bruggers to win the Mid Atlantic tag team title. It was the first championship Flair held in his career. The show was headlined by Johnny Valentine vs. Sonny King for the Mid Atlantic title and also featured a cage match with the Super Destroyer (Don Jardine) vs. Swede Hanson. That show drew

11,000 fans, a big crowd for that era. Again, while the Crockett territory was well remembered for big shows on Thanksgiving and Christmas, July 4th was more like Christmas and New Year's Eve, a date to avoid for a big show.

On July 4, 1981, Bill Watts was the one to revive what ended up being a run of major shows in the '80s on the nation's birthday. He booked the Superdome in New Orleans with Junkyard Dog & Dick Murdoch vs. The Wild Samoans for the Mid-South tag team title, and drew 18,000 fans. But the feeling must have been that it wasn't a good date to draw, as Watts never ran the Superdome on that day again, even though he often ran big shows in July.

Another match of some historic intrigue took place on July 4, 1982, at the Omni in Atlanta. Because WWF in those days didn't run on that date, it meant Bob Backlund didn't have a booking. Jim Barnett and booker Ole Anderson were able to put together the only Ric Flair vs. Bob Backlund NWA title vs. the WWF title match of that era, at the Omni in Atlanta. There had been a few Backlund vs. Harley Race matches with the WWF champion vs. NWA champion, always without a clear cut winner. Obviously this one also wouldn't have a clear cut winner, and ended up being a double count out in about 30 minutes. The show drew 13,000 fans, which was a big number for Atlanta at the time.

The show was promoted as a major holiday event with Backlund coming to the TBS studios in Atlanta to do a televised face-to-face as both champions claimed that their version was the real title. In Backlund's autobiography he talked about how he heard rumblings of a double-cross and how there may be an attempt to steal the title. His book was the first time I'd ever heard even a hint of that. It doesn't seem to make sense, although what he was told and the idea there may have been tension at the time with such a match, is certainly possible. The fact is, this was the last ever WWF vs. NWA champion match, as 18 months later the business had changed and would never change back.

Backlund said things were weird and he never got a straight story on it. It wasn't until late the next year that Vince McMahon started making the moves to go national, and the major promotions were still working together. Plus, Backlund as a former NCAA Division II national champion had a reputation as both a very good wrestler, but also for being in great condition. While Flair was also in great condition and was in that era an incredible performer, he wasn't about to be the guy to call to steal the title from Backlund. It wasn't his style and wrestling had long since evolved past that point. While Flair was a great athlete and had a wrestling background, as a shooter he was not considered in Backlund's league.

Flair in those days was having great matches almost every night. Backlund was hit-or-miss, but he rarely disappointed when in with a top-level worker. However, those who attended this match noted it was disappointing. There may have been a lack of comfort from both sides.

For the next few years, during the brief but well remembered heyday of World Class Championship Wrestling, July 4th meant sellout crowds at the Tarrant County Convention Center in Fort Worth.

Promoter Jack Adkisson (Fritz Von Erich) regularly built to his biggest events on July 4th, Labor Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas, calling them "Star Wars" events using the Star Wars music to help promote them.

In 1983, the first year of the feud, he headlined with both The Von Erichs, in this case Kevin & Kerry & David beating The Freebirds of Buddy Roberts & Terry Gordy & Michael Hayes to win the six-man tag titles in what was a tremendous match for that time period. By today's standards, the match wasn't as smooth as one would expect for a match of the year, but the heat was off the charts from start-to-finish and it may have been the best Freebirds vs. Von Erichs six-man title match of the entire feud. The other big match was Bruiser Brody vs. Kimala (as it was spelled at the time). This was the first meeting between the two and only went four minutes to a double DQ as Kimala was being pushed as a monster and Brody was considered the toughest guy around. This really kicked off what ended up being a

program that went into a number of territories. David ended up working twice as he also had a match with Jimmy Garvin over the Texas title. The show drew a sellout 12,000 fans, setting the city's all-time attendance and gate record.

One year later, with higher ticket prices, they broke that record and did a \$159,000 gate, which was an incredible number for a 12,000-seat building in 1984. David had passed away in February and Mike took his place on the Von Erich team. This was the first major show after the famous Texas Stadium show. It was both another Freebirds vs. Von Erichs match of the year type bout where the Freebirds won the World Class six-man titles, plus a Chris Adams & Stella Mae French vs. Garvin & Precious loser leaves town mixed tag in a cage match, which was a hot program as well, as Garvin and Precious were headed to Jim Crockett Promotions ending a successful run.

Over the next few years, July 4th was a major date for everyone. In 1985, World Class once again drew 12,000 fans in Fort Worth with Kevin & Kerry Von Erich losing to Gino Hernandez & Chris Adams, which was the new top program, plus what was billed as a Chicago death match with Kerry vs. One Man Gang, who Gary Hart had done a great job of getting over as a monster. Hernandez & Adams winning was to set up a double hair vs. hair match in October at the Cotton Bowl which the Von Erichs won before 26,000 fans.

Also on that date, Ric Flair and Magnum T.A. drew 13,000 fans at the Omni in an NWA title match, while Hulk Hogan vs. Brutus Beefcake for the WWF title at the Los Angeles Sports Arena drew a near sellout of 14,800 fans.

The last major hurrah for World Class on July 4th was in 1986, when they drew 11,500 fans to Fort Worth for a triple headliner of Rick Rude vs. Adams for their new version of the World title as the promotion left the NWA by this point. The other two key matches were Brody vs. Abdullah the Butcher and a Von Erich trio of Kevin & Mike & Lance (Kerry was injured due to a motorcycle accident at this point) against Butch Reed & Buzz Sawyer & Matt Borne.

In 1987, July 4th at the Omni was the original War Games. This gimmick match was promoted so well it's a shame Crockett Promotions didn't have PPV in place. They were still in the hot period which they fell out of just as they got on PPV, and the War Games promotion was the best gimmick match promotion of the era. The vignettes of building the new cage over two rings for the show in the Omni, using The Four Horsemen, being Flair & Arn Anderson & Tully Blanchard & Lex Luger with manager J.J. Dillon against Dusty Rhodes & The Road Warriors & Nikita Koloff & Paul Ellering drew 13,500 paying \$245,000. The only way to win was surrender. In those days, the top stars almost never quit, and when they did, it was talked about for years, such as Blanchard quitting against Magnum. That's why Dillon was in the match. Dillon legitimately got a shoulder separation taking the Doomsday Device from the Road Warriors for the finish. The match was incredible for its time, and the concept of the babyfaces constantly in peril with one man down, dives from ring-to-ring, and the quality of the talent in the matches in the early years made War Games, in its early years, a guaranteed great match every night.

War Games was a big draw on the road when they'd put it on tour before the promotion went downhill. Even when the promotion was struggling, for many years the War Games provided some of the best in-ring matches. To this day, older fans who remember the matches in the early years talk about why WWE wouldn't do one. Because it was the brainchild of Dusty Rhodes and Crockett Promotions when the wrestling war was hot, Vince McMahon has always shut down suggestions of doing it. Nobody else can do it either, since War Games was part of the WCW intellectual property which WWE owns. WWE did one of its last major successes on July 4th for a U.S. show that year, running Hogan vs. Randy Savage at the Los Angeles Sports Arena before 13,000 fans.

The War Games was the last hurrah for the huge July 4th spectacular type of event. WWF sometimes ran the date if it was on the weekend, but preferred to run it in Canada where it wasn't a holiday.

While there were no more supercards on that date in the U.S., there was an angle that was supposed to be historic. In 1993, when Hulk Hogan gave notice he was quitting WWE after Vince McMahon wanted him to put over Bret Hart, McMahon decided that the new Hulk Hogan would be Lex Luger, as the blond muscular patriotic hero. The idea was to have a bodyslam challenge on July 4th with 600 or so pound Yokozuna. Yokozuna was going to humiliate all the Americans. The key was that Hogan never slammed Yokozuna in their match. So a bunch of American wrestlers and a few NFL football players tried and couldn't. Luger, who had been wrestling as a heel, The Narcissist, came in last and did the slam. They spent the next two months building him up as the new Hogan. Instead of wrestling, they had him do a bus tour around the country to meet fans and show the clips on television, to build for a title match with Yokozuna at SummerSlam in Detroit. The momentum was strong, but the business was cold, at a historic low point. SummerSlam only drew 14,000 fans even with the build. Still, the decision was to hold off on the title change until WrestleMania. Luger won via count out and they had a big celebration, and he was then going to challenge for the belt. But not winning the title after the build-up caused Luger to cool off. By January's Royal Rumble, the crowd got behind Bret Hart instead of Luger when they were the last two. Luger not only never became the next Hogan, but he never got the title.

Even with the '80s success of July 4th shows, they pretty much came to an end, as far as being something special, in 1987 with the War Games. As big shows moved to PPV, July 4th was considered, and rightly so, a bad day to do a PPV show. UFC in the past decade would run one of its biggest events of the year often over July 4th weekend, but avoided the date itself; if July 4th came on a Saturday, the big show would be on July 11th.

The only exceptions were if July 4th came on a Monday or a Tuesday, WWF would do their television tapings, such as Raw this year.

Even if there may be fewer big events on July 4th than almost any holiday historically, the events on that day, at least in Dallas, the first War Games and Flair vs. Backlund were huge events for the time. But for its time, no July 4th match was bigger than the one 100 years ago, even if it was another situation where the legend of the match far exceeded what the match itself delivered.